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ON PAGE A-13

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## The Great Escape Artist . . .

Harry Houdini has been upstaged by Ronald Reagan. Houdini—at least in the movie I saw—went into a river encased in something like a safe, his hands cuffed behind him. Moments later, he emerged.

Reagan was bound and gagged by two congressional resolutions in the last week, got more money for his Central America adventures anyway, and popped up bound for China. Ladies and gentlemen, the Great Rondini, a figure that has inspired the imaginations of writers and cartoonists.

Reagan has become the great escape artist of our times. He has two basic tricks. The first is your basic now-you-see-him, now-you-don't maneuver. The president brought down the house with that one when he finally ordered the Marines withdrawn from Beirut.

The audience, knowing that he had said he was not going to be pushed around by terrorists, thought they were watching intently. But suddenly the Marines were gone. And so was the Great Rondini. He popped up in Santa Barbara. When he returned to Washington, it was as if nothing had happened.

The president pulled off the same trick again last week. When it was reported in the press that the CIA had directed the mining of three Nicaraguan harbors, Congress voted its indignation—and also failed to vote the funds the president wanted for El Salvador. The Great Rondini did his number. He dispatched the money anyway—and then slipped out of town. When last seen, he was heading for China.

His second trick is his ability to make everyone forget. It is often said that the Great Rondini himself is forgetful, but if that is the case, he has turned his personal affliction into an epidemic. He campaigned, after all, on a platform of balancing the budget. He actually lambasted Jimmy Carter for running up a \$29 billion deficit. This year the budget deficit is expected to be \$200 billion, but the Great Rondini has made everyone forget what he said in the campaign.

Similarly, his administration has again declared war against state-sponsored terrorism. This news was greeted with great excitement a couple of weeks ago by some newspaper editors, who placed the story on the front page. The Great Rondini made them forget. A war against terrorism was declared when the administration first took office, and, in fact, it was made the No. 1 priority. The war was declared again after both the American Embassy and the Marine barracks were bombed in Beirut, and now it has been declared one more time.

Remember school prayer? The Great Rondini has made us forget that also. For weeks the issue tied up Congress, had lawmakers at each other's throats, had the president talking about God being banned from the schools and the country slipping into irreversible and possibly terminal moral decay. Now no one, least of all the Great Rondini, mentions it. He is on to other matters.

The list of things he has made us forget is long. It includes the basis for his economic and tax program, which at one time was investment-based, then consumer-based and then turned out to be a variation of that old Democratic standby, Keynesian economics—a recovery fueled by massive deficit spending. It includes even Lebanon, which at one time was the keystone of the entire Middle East, and which, if it fell, would topple dominoes down to Saudi Arabia.

Suddenly, though, Lebanon is not that important any more and Saudi Arabia—as opposed to American foreign policy—stands tall.

The Great Rondini apparently learned his tricks back in his days as a motion-picture and television actor. What matters is the establishment of character—not continuity from either picture to picture or episode to episode. And the president has certainly established his character. It is one Americans seem to like, even love. Being a masterful magician, the president keeps our eyes on him and not what he does. Call it sleight of policy.

And so now he is about to reappear in China. By the time he returns, Congress will have forgotten it is angry with him over Central America. But even if it still is, the Great Rondini will distract it. Maybe he'll declare war on terrorism.